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CHILD WELFARE IN *Newsletter* PROGRESS

Dramatic Increase in Adoption of Children with Special Needs

Changes made last July to Alberta's Child Welfare Act, along with a sizeable decrease in the number of healthy newborn infants being surrendered for adoption by single parents, is dramatically increasing the number of adoptions of children with special needs, says Anne Scully, Program Supervisor, Adoption Services, Alberta Social Services.

She explained: the Child Welfare Act now prohibits children from remaining in a temporary situation for longer than two years. Ideally, children return to their natural parents within that time, but if that cannot happen, Social Services is usually made the permanent guardian of these children. As soon as a child has permanent guardianship status with Social Services we look for a permanent home situation for the child, preferably adoption, when that is possible.

"Ideal is to return to birth family"

Adoption is considered the most desirable means of giving children who are in the care of Social Services, stability and a permanent home.

As well, more single mothers are keeping their babies which means the list of people waiting to adopt healthy newborns and the length of time before such infants are available, grows ever longer.

Scully continues, "As the societal trend of a lower birth rate continues because fewer babies are surrendered by their birth parent, an increase in the number of people accepting special needs children is growing." This trend was confirmed last August by Dr. Maria Carey, a program planner with Family and Children's Services, Alberta Social Services. As part of a study undertaken by Dr. Carey, **The Functional Evaluation of the Child Welfare Adoption Program,** Dr. Carey circulated a questionnaire to 1,000 prospective adoptive parents who had been approved to adopt and were waiting for healthy newborn infants. Questions varied from asking if they

(cont'd next page)

"Every child without parents has special needs"

Association Supports Adoptive Parents Lobbies for Legislative Change

Adoptive parents sometimes have concerns about their children or relationships within the family and with siblings; sometimes they need to be assured that they're doing things right; and often they are aware of issues concerning adoption that they feel strongly should be changed. These are some of the things the Adoptive Parent Association deals with.

Terri Spronk, chairperson of the provincial association which currently boasts 400 members, says the association is a support group for adoptive parents. Members are primarily adoptive parents, but anyone interested in the adoption process and other adoption matters are welcome to join.

The Association, established as a registered charitable organization in 1983, has six chapters throughout the province - in Calgary, Edmonton, Fort McMurray, Lakeland, Lethbridge, and Red Deer. In addition to regular meetings where members offer support, advice based on personal experiences, and referral information, the association is a lobbying body. They encourage research and study in the area of adoption and hold workshops and conferences to inform the general public and members of various professions of special concerns about adoption.

New members are always welcome and may call Terri Spronk at 477-1379 for more detailed information.

Dramatic Increase in Adoptions *(Cont.)*

would consider adopting a child with some special needs, to would they refuse to adopt a child who had a specific handicap and if yes, to name the handicap or dysfunction.

The results of the questionnaire indicated an overwhelming number would consider taking a child other than a healthy newborn.

"This is a positive trend for children in the care of Social Services," says Scully. "It also means that many children with complex needs will be adopted and have a permanent home. This might not have occurred five years ago."

Following on the study and the questionnaire results, Scully and Sharon Glanville, Assistant Program Supervisor with Social Services, were assigned to a special project to review the files of all children with permanent guardianship status and to make a concerted effort to place those children with special needs in a permanent home situation.

There are at present about 2,000 children in the care of the Children's Guardian. But Glanville is quick to add that, realistically, the number considered adoptable is lower.

"Overwhelming number will adopt child with special needs"

"Many are older, 16 or 17, and soon to be living independently. Some have been living in a foster home for a long time and are receiving excellent care. We would not view such a child as a candidate for adoption outside of the foster home."

Some are very seriously handicapped with multiple problems and must have intensive institutional care. They are difficult to place.

Both Scully and Glanville are pleased with the success of the project. "We are heartened by the high caliber of adoptive families. Since December, 180 special needs children have been matched with adoptive parents. More than 100 of the children are now living with their adoptive families and for the others, pre-placement visits are underway."

Glanville also says there is some misunderstanding of "special needs." She says that people immediately think of a child with multiple handicaps such as mental retardation coupled with physical disabilities, blindness or deafness with speech problems. She considers every child who is without his or her parents as a child who has special needs.

"Most children really want to be adopted. They're wonderful, warm, loving, and can offer great rewards to parents no matter what special needs they may have."

Some of the special needs children Social Services are attempting to match with adoptive parents are:

"Constantly in awe of marvellous adoptive parents"

- siblings (brothers and sisters should remain together)
- older children (some adoptive parents now want children who are past the diaper and bottle stage)
- races other than caucasian
- mental, emotional, physical problems
- developmental delays, learning disabilities

Scully and Glanville are confident that within a few years, the number of children with special needs waiting to be adopted will be considerably shorter. "In the future we won't have such numbers because of the Child Welfare Act which now emphasizes early intervention, and by legislating a maximum of two years in temporary care, a permanent home will be found quickly for children who have permanent guardianship status with Social Services."

"Confident permanent homes will be found quickly"

"Special needs sometimes misunderstood"

FOSTER PARENTS TO TRAIN FOSTER PARENTS

When Bob Moores became president of the Lethbridge Foster Parents Association, a major concern was the small number of members who had received any formal guidance in fostering as it relates to Alberta's Child Welfare Act. After speaking with Dr. Herb Sohn, the Children's Guardian, who shares this concern and says he believes that training in the application of the Child Welfare Act is a necessity for all foster parents, Moores decided to do something about training foster parents in his association.

His first goal was to build a strong relationship between the foster parents and the Lethbridge District Office of Alberta Social Services. He approached the district office staff, and then Ann Moore, Regional Representative to the Child Welfare Implementation Project (CWIP) and suggested that foster parents belonging to the association be trained sufficiently in Alberta legislation that they would be able to do ongoing training of other foster parents.

A training session to train foster parents was subsequently organized and foster parents from other associations in southern Alberta also participated. Ann Moore, with the assistance of Carl Rausch of the Office of the Children's Guardian, coordinated the four-day workshop. Topics included such matters as: a general overview of the legislation; court orders; agreements; the Appeal Panel; Native matters; confidentiality; the types of written records which foster parents should keep concerning children in their care, and also included a session on presentation skills which was conducted by Community Relations Officer, Doug Shepherd.

The foster parents who attended the Lethbridge workshop have offered to travel elsewhere in southern Alberta to assist social workers in other district offices at training sessions for foster parents.

Moores says the association sees this training as an opportunity to reach all foster parents in Lethbridge as well as to build a support network among foster parents in remote rural areas.

COOPERATION WORKS FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD PROBLEMS

An early childhood treatment program, made possible through the cooperation of three different groups is helping young children in Calgary to overcome numerous problems.

The need for a treatment program for preschool children was first identified by Alberta Social Services child welfare workers. During their involvement with child abuse and neglect situations, the social workers encountered several very young children with behavioral, speech and learning problems. With funds made available from the department's Opportunity Fund for Children and Handicapped Persons, staff from Alberta Social Services and staff from Children's Village, a children's treatment centre operated by the Salvation Army, developed a program to deal with these problems. The Calgary School Board made available two classrooms in Sunalta Public School at a very low rent and also provided two teachers for the program.

Thirty families have been approved to participate in the treatment program. Ten families are seen on an out-patient basis and 20 children are enrolled in the school classes. In each classroom, one teacher and two child care workers are assigned to work with ten children each. A speech therapist and a psychologist are also assigned half time to the program and all children in the program may also receive treatment from the staff psychiatrist and psychologist at Children's Village.

Children are referred to the program by hospitals and Social Services. Children's Village then screens them for admission to the program based on results of psychological testing and family assessment. The Calgary School Board provides both staff and equipment to the program.

According to Helen Timoffee, Program Consultant, Children's Residential Services, with Social Services in Calgary, the program is working well. "We're excited about the model. Some of the children are very disturbed and they are responding well to this treatment."

A legacy to the Children's Village has been designated to the early childhood treatment program and plans are to build a permanent building for the program.

SOCIAL SERVICES TO PREPARE ADOLESCENTS TO LIVE INDEPENDENTLY

A young man, who for seven years was a permanent ward of Alberta Social Services, is using his experiences as a former foster child to ease 16 and 17-year-olds into a self-sufficient lifestyle. Dallas Nikolai, now 21, is currently working with the Department of Social Services on a plan to prepare adolescents who are nearing an age when they will no longer be in the care of the department for the transition to independent living. His assignment is to review a self-help manual for youths that Social Services hopes will be made available to all older adolescents, not just to foster children.

"Self-help manual benefits all adolescents"

Nikolai calls the manual developed by the Rocky Mountain House District Office and already in use in some parts of the province, "a credible attempt to address what actually happens to youth when they leave the system." But, looking at the book through the eyes of a young person, he says it requires some revision if it is to be relevant to those who are meant to read it. His first reaction to the manual was, "It's big. Too big. If I'd been handed this when I was in care I'd have said, hey, I didn't ask for a novel."

"Easy to find what you need to know"

According to Nikolai, the major tasks are to identify the sections that should be simplified or restructured so it's easy to find what you need to know; and to suggest ways to make it hit home.

Referring to his own transition from foster care to independent living, he says such a manual would have been invaluable had it been available. "When you're in care, everything is done for you. You don't even make your own breakfast. When you're cut loose at 16 or 17 or 18, you haven't learned to shop for food. You don't know how to open a bank account. The information to be included helps with these little things."

"Everything done for those in care"

The manual is only one part of the department's plan to provide independence-preparation for the foster adolescent group. "It requires more than just one manual to help these kids who are about to go out on their own," he says, "but it will alleviate many of the problems and should increase the statistics of youth who succeed in adjusting quickly to independent living."

"More youths will succeed"

CHILD WELFARE IN PROGRESS NEWSLETTER

is published by the Child Welfare Implementation Project and distributed to individuals and groups concerned with the Alberta child welfare system.

The Child Welfare Act: One Year Later

An upcoming edition of the Staff Communique will focus on a special report concerning the evolvement of the Act over the past year.

Your participation is invited. If you'd like to share comments, points of view, or an article relating to the Act's development, please contact Dean Darnell, Joyce Gariepy, or Kate MacMillan at 422-5187. Publication deadline is August 1, 1986.

We look forward to your response.

Involving Community Brings Special Services

In its efforts to involve the community and to contract private sector companies where possible to provide the services needed by children and families, Alberta Social Services is working with Calgary Integrated Services. This company operates various social services and community programs in Alberta and in British Columbia.

One of the programs, the Calgary Life Improvement Program, assists teenagers who are single parents and their pre-school children. Another, the Youth Environment Program, works with youths who have been expelled from school. This program is operated from a house in the city where half of each day is spent in academic classes and the other half in community activities. The third and latest project undertaken is designed to meet the specialized needs of 16 and 17-year-olds. Counselling is offered as well as crisis intervention when required.

Appeal Panel Hears 21 Cases

Since the Child Welfare Appeal Panel was set up last summer, decisions made by Child Welfare staff have been appealed. The number of appeals is expected to increase, according to Micky Casavant, Director of the Appeal and Advisory Secretariat. "I expect we'll have a steady flow of appeals as people become more aware of the appeal process, made possible by the Child Welfare Act."

Of the appeals heard to date, Casavant said approximately 50 percent of the decisions have been reversed in favor of the appellant. Even with the anticipated increase

"Negligible number compared to total decisions made daily"

in hearings, Casavant says the number of appeals brought before the Appeal Panel "is negligible compared to the total number of decisions made every day by child welfare staff."

Although no testimony is given under oath, the Appeal Panel is a formal hearing. The hearing is conducted in private and all information is confidential. The Panel's decisions, excluding identifying information, may be used by Alberta Social Services in monitoring its child welfare program.

People appearing before the Appeal Panel are entitled to representation by a lawyer or

"No charge for hearing"

some other person of their choosing. Witnesses may be called, if appropriate, and evidence entered in support of a case.

There is no charge to the appellant for an Appeal Panel hearing, but costs such as travel expenses, lawyers fees, and salary lost through time absent from work are the responsibility of the person requesting the hearing.

The decision of the Appeal Panel is final. A decision must be handed down by the Appeal Panel within two weeks of the hearing, however, the decision is usually made within a couple of days.

Members of the Appeal Panel are: Shirley Balderson of Edmonton, Lee Hunt of Endiang, Bill Jackson of Sherwood Park, Adelle Reimer of Calgary, Dr. Joseph Storcer of Grande Prairie, Elaine Wiedemann of Medicine Hat, and Robert Cardinal of Winterburn.

Decisions that can be appealed include removal or placement of a child, certain visiting provisions, release of information, support services for children 16 or over, failure to enter agreements or apply for court orders for children believed to be in need of protective services, refusal to enter agreements for handicapped children, and refusal of appli-

"Decisions within two weeks"

cations to adopt or to become a foster parent.

These decisions may be appealed by the child involved, the child's guardian or parent, the foster parent or someone who has cared for the child involved for more than six months.

To submit a request for an appeal, appellants must complete an application for hearing form, available from their social worker. Assistance in completing the form is available on request. The completed form should be returned to the social worker who will forward it to the appropriate office.

Alberta
SOCIAL SERVICES